

Lunchtime Winter Garden Visits to Two Smithsonian Gardens

by Jan Marie Pickrel, Fairfax Master Gardener

Winter's darkness and cold temperatures provide the illusion that our gardens are in a state of dormancy. To the contrary, our gardens are alive and ready to provide us with a bounty of information. This past week, I visited two gardens during a lunchtime walk and was rewarded with lessons on U.S. history, plant and animal diversity and plants in industrial economy.

My first stop was to the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, located off 12th Street and between Constitution Ave. and Madison Dr., NW. The Smithsonian maintains a demonstration "Victory Garden" to show the popularization of backyard gardening to ensure fresh fruits and vegetables for the home kitchen table. This practice was named "Victory Garden" in World Wars I and II (1917 to 1918 and 1941 to 1945) when commercial farming focused on providing food to overseas military troops. The garden frequently shows sequential-season vegetable planting designs, with vegetables that are ready to eat in early spring. Others are planted in the fall for winter harvest, in order to maximize vegetable production in small spaces, interspersed with flowers for pollination and tabletop enjoyment.



photo: by author

Summer Victory Garden

Instead of seeing winter crops like beets and kale this December, I discovered the bermed garden beds covered in a short green grass-like crop with a sign: "New garden beds coming soon. . . Pardon the mess." A quick internet search identified that the garden was in a rehabilitation mode to combat two species of parasitic root-knot nematodes (microscopic roundworms in the soil) that had been affecting plant growth. The soil treatment began with "solarization" where the soil was covered in plastic to cook and kill the nematodes. The website recommends regular cleaning of garden tools, crop rotation and selecting plants that naturally attract "good" nematodes as preventative maintenance practices to discourage "bad" nematodes in your garden. We'll need to revisit in the spring to see if the solarization worked!

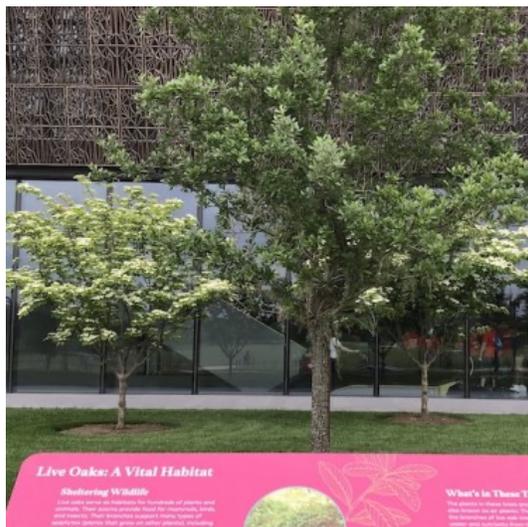


photo: Smithsonian - Creative Commons Zero

Live Oak at Smithsonian

Next stop on my lunch excursion was the "Live Oak" exhibit along the sidewalk, partially encircling the northwestern corner of the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture, along 15th Street and Constitution Avenue, NW. Historical facts and habitat features of the Southern live oak (*Quercus virginiana*) are shared via trail signs. Many of us are only familiar with live oaks as the evergreen ("live") trees draped with Spanish moss that frame the landscape of antebellum "Gone with the Wind"-era plantations. The trail signs here inform us that these trees were considered a national security value in the early years of the U.S., such that the U.S. government purchased forests for the shipbuilding industry.

After my lunch walk, I conducted further research and learned that the frigate USS Constitution hull was constructed in 1795 of live oak wood and that John Quincy Adams established the first national tree farm in 1828 between Pensacola Bay and Santa Rosa Sound, FL.

The trail signs also share statistics that some of the oldest live oaks in the U.S. “are estimated to be several hundred to more than a thousand years old” and may grow as tall as 65 feet with branches spreading to provide shade more than 90 feet in diameter. Their acorns feed numerous mammals, birds and insects, including the Florida Scrub Jay (*Aphelocoma coerulesdens*) and the Florida Butterfly Orchid (*Encyclia tampensis*) in its native Florida habitat, as well as shade plants such as the bromeliad Spanish moss (*Tillandsia usneoides*) and other mosses and ferns. As the live oak species’ historical northern boundary is southern Tidewater Virginia, these trees were planted here in Washington, DC for study of their resiliency to grow in more northern climates and how they might be affected by climate change.

This approximate hour-long walk provided a wealth of historical and botanical information and foundations for further research of how our U.S. native plants have shaped our economy and culture.

Titles of trail markers around the Smithsonian African American History Museum:

- Sheltering Branches
- Live Oaks: A Vital Habitat
- Live Oaks; Specimens of Global, Scholarly and Public Research

References

- [The Victory Garden](#), Alex Dencker and Erin Holiman, Smithsonian Gardens
- [Turning Up the Heat: Soil Solutions for the Victory Garden](#), Erin Holiman, Smithsonian Gardens
- [Live Oaks: A Vital Habitat, Sheltering Branches](#), Smithsonian Gardens
- [The Live Oak Tree: A Naval Icon](#), National Park Service